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HENRY JAMES: AN IMPRESSION

BY EDITH WYATT

“NEVER say you know the last word of any human heart.” It is the opening sentence of *Louisa Pallant*. The beauty it expresses echoes in the spirit long after one closes any novel of Henry James. Alike from his greater and his lesser tales of fiction, one turns away with a heightened desire of understanding moral souls.

After twenty-five years of reading him, it is as a fiction writer first that one thinks of Henry James. In viewing him as a fiction writer, one looks back at an extraordinary variety of enriching recreation in his pages. Whatever that variety, this one striking experience has attended the pleasure of all my own acquaintance with them: from the first word to the last I have been eager to learn the truth about his characters. What they did, what they suffered, their pains, their passions, their delights, are very little to me in comparison with what they themselves are.

One lives the life of Henry Fielding’s and of Thomas Hardy’s men and women, and of Turgenev’s and of Mr. Howells’s and Mr. H. G. Wells’s. The character of the “human interest” in Henry James’s novels (for me, at least) is radically different in kind. The refreshment of reincarnation in other creatures is not a part of that interest. The fascination of the tale of Milly Theale and of Nanda Brookenham, and of Chad Newsome and Strether, lies, not in one’s imaginative embodiment in their natures, but in learning what essential stuff these natures are made of. Tone by tone, qualification by qualification, behind one lifted curtain after another, the ways and motives of their inner spirits are revealed.

The master of a great art, Henry James is so dazzling in performance that one instinctively regards the play of the

fountain rather than its secret springs: and thinks of him as a supremely accomplished writer, before one considers him as an author and source of creative ideas. All he has written seems a part of literature. Of an achievement so great, one can of course, in a brief account of a long enjoyment of his pages, give only a few indications of the ways in which his medium has seemed markedly expressive.

The prefaces of his last-published edition of his fiction, concerning the manner of each of these compositions, offer a comment necessarily so much more deeply-derived than that of a mere reader, and even a frequent re-reader, that nearly all subsequent words on the topic of his fictive production have an air of casual and of superficial consideration. "Were I minded" he says in the preface to *The Awkward Age* (in referring to one of its "books"), "to use in this connection 'a loud word'—and the critic in general hates loud words as a man of taste may hate loud colors—I should speak of the composition of the chapters entitled 'Tishy Grendon,' with all the pieces of the game on the table together and each unconfusedly and contributively placed, as triumphantly scientific." The pleasure one has in witnessing his achievements in his later works is like watching a player win a complicated game of solitaire. He proceeds to build up one series of impressions after another, with a species of science—since this word having once resounded may perhaps permissibly be echoed—which this particular reader chances never to have observed in the method of any other writer.

It is by chromatic shades and half-tones that many elements in the miracle of our whole mysterious existence reveal themselves to us: and in his mastery, indeed it may almost be said in his creation, of a method of expression which proceeds by chromatic shades and half-tones and crescent qualifications, Henry James's genius is supreme. The infinite faculty of man, the kaleidoscopic character of the human mind, glimmers richly from the distinguished presence of *The Awkward Age*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of a Dove*. The curiousness of life, the enigma of its intricacy, is always there to fascinate you, as you are fascinated by prodigies of nature,—the seamed face of the Matterhorn, or the roofs of stalactite caves. At once the most original and the most conventional of authors, he never repeats his knowledge. And too, the texture of Henry James's expres-

sion has a wonderfully consistent surface. His dialogue is all of this texture. It is almost as difficult to break pieces out to quote, as it would be to quote a portion of a tapestry. You can not characterize a figure by one of his remarks, as you can with Daudet's and Thackeray's. The miracle is that, conditioned as the conversation of Henry James's people is by this uniformity in the warp and woof of their speech, they yet represent, at once so fully and so delicately, innumerable differences of nature. Outward peculiarities of personal speech and of personal appearance are of course only too often concealments, rather than affirmations, of a personal spirit. Someone said once of a brilliant physician who was blind, "He has a chance really to know what people's souls are like. He is not distracted by their appearances." The blurring of distinctions of individual speech in Henry James's art of composition serves in this same manner, by eliminating a distraction, to show intimate motives more clearly than a presentment truer to the facts of existence.

Then—though Milly Theale and Kate Croy speak according to the texture of the book in which they appear, rather than according to their own several natural histories—they narrate themselves to us, after all, as people narrate the qualities of their souls to us in real life. This most precious learning which earth has to bestow we acquire, not by witnessing some signal act of courage, or staunchness, or wisdom, but by a long and multitudinous series of changing and corrected impressions.

Henry James, alone—so far as I know—among novelists, has had a cosmopolitan purpose. No other human being, I think, has exhibited, as a writer, so clear and so frequent an intent of understanding and portraying men and women of other nationalities than his own. For this intent, too, his method has proved to be a miraculous instrument. Without at any time speaking any such tongue as, let us say, the French-English of Thackeray's *Florac*, his medium serves as a species of Volapuk for presenting a peopled world inhabited by French and Italians and Germans and Americans and English. Those who feel that he has disparaged Americans would do well to consider their extremely noble appearance among these figures in his pages.

His tale is always told in the tone of the world-traveler: and makes a world-traveler of its reader. Never has such

a faculty seemed more valuable to letters than at the present moment. Its presence dignifies all his efforts. The scenes his people inhabit are produced for you as by a master of the revels of the globe. You see the enriching spectacles that have delighted hundreds of thousands of human beings of all climes and nations. The mellow light, the vast human heritage of the pleasures of countless Summers and Winters of passionate pilgrims, rest on a hundred places where one has sojourned in his tales. Yet, lovely as his evocations are, they remain almost purely spectacular. If when you visit these scenes you look upon cities of men, manners, and climates, Ulysses never shows you anything of councils and governments, of any currents of collective human purpose circulating in the lands where he guides you. His world-pageant is unrolled for you by an author whose interest is cosmopolitan, but not international.

It seems almost an ungrateful discrimination to make about a writer whose production has, as a whole, illumined the world for his readers more than the effort of any other author. But truth seems to require such an acknowledgment all the more because in this wonderful illumination he is peerless. No Elizabethan, nor Grecian, not the text of Holy Writ, reveals that special wide-spread candid light it was his destiny to show us. No other writer has expressed as he has the profound and large charm of our human opportunity simply as inhabitants of a globe. Yet, beautifully as the outward aspect, wonderfully as the individual souls, of any nation whose scene and people are present in Henry James's fiction are portrayed, these are never related, in my experience of his pages, to any general social consciousness, to any of the contemporary notions and ideas rising from that silent spirit of collective masses which Renan tells us is the source of all great things.

Almost all his figures lead lives fully peopled, fully sociable in the sense of being constantly in communication with other individuals, but not in any large sense social, nor touched by any of the moods of a profound general consciousness. The wide, the fascinating currents of contemporary thought seem never to wash the shores of those lands where they lead their convincing fabled existence, in one way so much in the world of today, and yet, in another way, not in it at all. Justice and injustice by no means wait outside this widespread world of Henry James's creation. But

his reference, his people's reference, to justice and injustice is always personal, and never swings to a broader range.

Everybody who has read Henry James's novels and tales for the last twenty-five years has probably realized that, with a few notable exceptions, no matter who the hero or the heroine may be or what the conditions of his existence, this character—who has been, from the beginning, making up his mind whether he will or will not support the frame of things as they are—will conform. He will support the frame of things as they are, even if, like Hyacinth Robinson, he has to commit suicide to do it.

Why do they all acquiesce? Why does Maggie Verver go back to, or rather never depart from, her treacherous and gross husband? Why does Madame de Mauves submit to her perhaps less treacherous and more gross companion? Why does Isabelle Archer return to *her* base husband? Why, when the character of his behest seems to her unwarrantable and even contemptible, does she advise her step-daughter to sacrifice all her dearest instincts to obey it? Why does "The American" act according to the wish of the murderous brother and mother of Madame de Cintre? Useless to multiply instances. They all acquiesce, of course, for very different reasons. But it is never, so far as I recall—except in the case of Merton Densher—from an imputed infirmity of purpose. It must be remembered that not one of the protagonists mentioned is described as at all weak-willed, or of dependent nature. On the contrary, they are all represented as rather strong-willed and of independent nature. But in every case, fretted through a long period of doubt, they are at last played on. However rotten things are in the State of Denmark, they never kill the king. This striking feature—the determination to let things remain as they are in the State of Denmark—is almost as invariable a feature of Henry James's composition as dark tree-trunks before a misted horizon is of Corot's.

What is remarkable is not so much the acquiescence itself, as the fact that the artist almost always treats it as an act of high courage and vision. It is a little as though—to indicate this treatment in its least convincing aspects—Chaucer should be at a great deal of pains, in telling the story of Patient Griselda, to make you believe that Griselda is not so much subservient as spirited.

Someone has said of Turgenev's novels that, as in Whit-

man's poem, after all the heroes are discouraged and gone, liberty is the last to go out. In Henry James's novels, the spirit that remains after all their heroes and heroines are gone is the spirit of the conventional. The word is not used here in its narrower sense, but in that grave meaning Isabel Archer considers in her long meditation—the meaning of “the love of harmony and order and decency and all the stately offices of life.”

Like chromosomes which are apparent only in their susceptibility to a certain stain, the manifestations of life which were most vivid to Henry James's mind were those, I believe, which could take the dye of the traditional, of the conventional: and other manifestations were almost non-existent for him. He could not, I think, have seen his heroes and heroines doing things inharmonious and indecorous: as soon as they began they would have become ridiculous, and then dim, and then have vanished.

Far more apparent in the criticism of Henry James than in his fiction is his color-blindness to manifestations of life not susceptible to traditional and conventional dyes. A critical perception rather derisive of the emergent genius of Ibsen and of Whistler and of Whitman, and that asks what the interest is in the novels of Arnold Bennett and of H. G. Wells, shows, I think one is forced to admit, a very striking limitation of vision. The rising realization of the error and irrationality of the present economic order, the present social order; the growing knowledge of the overwhelming extent of poverty on the earth; the study of numberless causes and effects of that poverty, and of meliorative efforts against it: these vital concerns have absorbed much of the most intense, most uncompromising, most creative and characteristic thought of our time. The fact that all this range of thought seems to remain outside the realm of the criticism of Henry James, just as it remains outside his fiction, with all else which does not show the colors or the grace of conventional things, seriously narrows his appreciation of much vivid truth and beauty.

When that is said, he yet remains a great, an imaginative critic both of society and of letters. There is not space here to comment on his scope and brilliancy in this field, nor to mention more than one of his extraordinary values. In that delightful book, *Partial Portraits*, in his wonderful essay on Turgenev, he tells us that the Russian author was “abso-

lutely without that eagerness of self-reference which sometimes accompanies great and even small reputations," and he quotes the eloquent words of the elegy of Renan—"Turgenev received, by that mysterious decree which marks out human vocations, the gift which is noble beyond all others; he was born essentially impersonal." This fine tribute might fittingly have been paid to Henry James himself. The grace of that fresh and inspiring gift permeates all his words on letters.

Our own land is filled with a squalor of personal reference. The tone of Henry James's criticism alone is a clarifying pleasure in the midst of it, like a salt breath of the air of the seas that reach around the earth, blowing into some close apartment in a dwelling on their shores.

The work of a great writer, and a voluminous writer, must always say very different things to different persons. As in every other long acquaintanceship, one is always finding a disparaging criticism which refers accurately to one period and instance of a very large phenomenon not applicable to it as a whole. For many reasons there will probably long be numbers of American readers to whom no aspect of Henry James's work will say anything at all. People here have formed a habit of passing their eyes hastily over vast acreages of text, dully apprehended. They are abundantly provided with reading-matter which they can "follow" with half their mind on other matters, or even half-asleep. A restless inattention pervades our national habits of thought. To enjoy Henry James requires the reader's attention. Then—he is accomplished and exhaustive and profound and critical: and we prefer authors to be ignorant and casual and obvious and flattering; and not even in an appreciation of letters are we able to assume the gift which is noble beyond all others, of being essentially impersonal.

Henry James's criticisms of America are far less contemptuous, and perhaps less penetrating, than Thoreau's criticisms, which Americans receive so unresentfully: more candid, and more wise, than Heine's ironies on the subject of Germany, which his countrymen seem to love to crush against their bosoms. As a protest against his country's lack of principle, Thoreau refused to support its government by refusing to pay his taxes. As an avowed defiance of his nation's philistinism, Heine left Germany in his thirty-

fourth year, to live in France. Remaining there until his death, some twenty-five years afterwards, he asked in his will, near the close of that long martyrdom of pain he bore so bravely in the Valley of the Shadow, that his ashes be buried in Paris.

All apart from the consideration of the justice of the view of the soldier in the liberation war of humanity, all apart from the question of one's own belief in the cause Thoreau espoused, there is something that rouses admiration in the acts of both these men of genius. Their conduct betokens a large inner life such as everyone must honor, where ideas are the abiding realities. It chances that the sympathy of the present writer is with that "sober-suited freedom" of which Mr. Howells spoke so beautifully not long since as the instinctive sympathy of our own national heritage. But irrespective of one's national sympathies, when Henry James became, in her hour of struggle, a subject of the country where he had lived and worked for the last forty years, there was in the same manner, I think, a quality in the act that everyone must honor, except those people in any and every country for whom patriotism means simply a violent and assertive claimancy and a hatred of alien nations.

No written words have, I suppose, better served the cause of civilization against that stupid and tragic error of hatred among nations than the life-work of Henry James.

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